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THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Rick Bass and Stellarondo: Marrying music and literature in Montana and beyond

By Singer/Songwriter
Caroline Keys

The first time Stellarondo met to compose music for Rick Bass's short fiction, our gathering took place on a summer day in the nave of Norman Maclean's father's church. It was an auspicious moment – our location linked to Montana's literary past, our collaborative partner a current figure in Montana literature, the work we created nudging up against the boundaries of what Montana literature had previously done and toward the future.

Of the collaboration author David James Duncan says: "The marriage of Rick Bass narratives to Stellarondo's acoustic accompaniments is a welcome exploration of some serious 'what if' questions ... what if one of the great story technologies of the 21st century remains the human ear, the unadorned imagination, the heartbeat, and the marriage of live telling to live music?"

Back in 2010 on a road trip to Portland, OR, Stellarondo band members discussed the fact that our developing sound seemed suited to much more than just songs. Gregory Spatz, director of the Inland Northwest Center for Writers, once introduced the band this way: "They really need to be discovered by someone in the indie-film business because their music would serve perfectly as a soundtrack. The music already feels like an indie film – like it's telling a story and evoking many of the feelings I associate with narrative."

We liked the idea of working in film and were commissioned to score a short film shot in Montana by Vincent Ma and to perform a score for Paul Strand's "Manhatta" live at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival. But the idea of working with a writer, with Rick Bass specifically, was a thing we felt passionate about pursuing. So we did. And in summer of 2011 we began working.

The story-scoring process is truly collaborative. When Rick hands stories to us, they are living and breathing, both the prose and the music malleable. Sometimes Rick changes words, perhaps lengthens a passage if the music begs to go on longer, or strikes a phrase there if the music seems to take care of the sentiment. And we musicians certainly go through drafts of our sonic ideas.

The resulting effect, according to Mariss McTucker of *Lively Times*, is that "Rick Bass's tightly-written tales are so visual they need no accompaniment, yet Stellarondo has given the listener a new perspective – a storyboard for the mind."

The opportunity to perform with this group is a highlight for me. Often at shows, the traditional audience-performers roles become reversed – we tend to watch the audience from the stage. It is rewarding see lights go on in different parts of people's minds while one hemisphere processes music and another processes story.

This has been especially noticeable during our high school and University visits – seeing a student who might not otherwise be prone to give his attention over to a reading put in a trance by electric guitar, then have a visible emotional reaction to events and turns in the story.

Also, this crossing of genres draws a diverse crowd. I remember looking out into the audience at our Humanities Montana Festival



Author Rick Bass (second from left) joins Stellarondo in a unique marriage of music and story.

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– Gregory Spatz,
director of the Inland
Northwest Center for Writers

of the Book performance to see the expected suits and ties and occasional cowboy hat, but was surprised to see that many parents had brought their young children. Also, I noticed a stronger presence of college-age attendees at that reading than I had ever seen at a Festival of the Book event.

It seems that the fusion of Stellarondo's music and Rick Bass's fiction begs curiosity and delivers surprise to most who come to listen and see.

As a member of Stellarondo, my experience of this collaboration is intrinsically tied to place. We normally compose and rehearse on the back porch at my home in the Rattlesnake Valley as long as weather allows – and

sometimes even after. The stories we work on are place-based, many of them set in Montana.

We have traveled Montana roads together as a group and when we tour out of state, serve as ambassadors of Montana music and literary innovation. It is our hope that the CD of three short stories and one essay that we recorded in 2012 will send our project out into the world beyond the places we are able to physically visit to perform.

I write this article from my studio at the Virginia Center for Creative Arts where I am currently composer in residence. An experience I had yesterday proved the reach and scope of this collaboration and the way it points back to

Montana.

Last night a new Fellow arrived at VCCA from Iowa. When she saw that my nametag read Missoula, she said, "Oh, Montana! On my drive here I was listening to an album of Rick Bass stories set to music. Do you know the band Stellarondo?"

"Certainly do," I replied.

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– David James Duncan

MONTANA POET LAUREATE

Soup

By Tami Haaland
from *When We Wake in the Night*



Green worm dying in a bowl on the counter.
Snow falling. Would it be kinder to put it
outside, let cold air take it or give it
a contained and warm place to spend its last?
The woman hovering near the sink
averts her eyes. Worms are too pliable, soft.

Once she found a snake dead two days
and did not hesitate to tear the flesh,
use sticks to pry rattles from bone.
Who can explain? She makes soup,
she sweeps, she washes her hands.
The children will be home soon and may
offer to take the worm. May eat the soup
and bread she has made, may tell her
stories of how their days have gone.

The counter is laden with poblanos,
broccoli and winter squash. Pumpkin
near the fire, zucchini and corn
in the center of the table. The garden
concluding in heaps. And the worm.
She could never touch the worm, only tip
the bowl and let it fall to the frosty ground.

About Stellarondo

Instrumentation

Gibson Hartwell: pedal steel, electric guitar, railroad detritus, octave mandolin

Caroline Keys: banjo, kalimba, bloogle resonator, electric guitar, oscillator

Bethany Joyce: cello, saw

Travis Yost: double bass, oscillator, guitar

Upcoming performances

- The Big Read in Billings, February 2014
- Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference in Seattle, March 2014

Past performances

- Montana Public Radio special
- In Missoula: at the University Theater, Big Sky High School, Willard School and Hellgate High School
- 2012 Get Lit! Festival, Spokane
- Release parties for *Whitefish Review*, Issues 10 and 12
- Tours of Pacific Northwest, 2012 and 2013
- Portland State University
- 2012 Humanities Montana Festival of the Book